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RR RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW  
DE RUEHCI #0354/01 3590833  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 240833Z DEC 08  
FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2228  
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC  
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHPH/CDC ATLANTA GA  
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2723

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000354

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR OES/PCI, PES/IHB, SCA/INS, STAS, AIAG  
HHS PASS TO NIH/FIC (GLASS/MAMPILLY/HANDLEY) FDA  
(LUMPKIN/WELSCH, GENEVA FOR HOFMAN)  
MAS/DAS/JESTRADA  
MAC/DAS/HVINEYARD  
CDC FOR BLOUNT/FERRELL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KFLU](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [SENV](#) [CASC](#) [PGOV](#) [IN](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: STATE GOVERNMENTS CONTAIN AVIAN INFLUENZA OUTBREAKS IN WEST  
BENGAL AND ASSAM

REF: NEW DELHI 3184

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The West Bengal state government (GOWB) has completed culling operations in the confirmed Avian Influenza (AI) epicenter in Malda district. The GOWB claims to have contained the latest outbreak, citing its limited size and better level of preparedness. One senior GOWB official privately conjectured that AI outbreaks may be caused by poultry trade with Bangladesh during the Islamic religious holidays. While GOWB officials have made themselves available to the press, they have not conducted an active public information campaign. The state government confirmed plans for a H15N testing facility in Kolkata by the end of January 2009. The government of Assam reports no new AI outbreaks.

#### West Bengal Culling Operations Completed

¶2. (SBU) On December 22 West Bengal state government's Rapid Response Teams completed culling and mopping operations in the villages of Narhatta and Satgharia in Malda district. Teams culled approximately 28,700 birds (9,000 of which were from commercial farms) and destroyed 1,255 eggs and 197 kg of feed. West Bengal's Principal Secretary for Animal Husbandry Development Department Dilip Chakraborty told PolOff that the current AI outbreak in Malda is limited in size, especially when compared to the outbreak earlier in 2008, and claimed that the GOWB has been able to limit its spread.

¶3. (U) According to Chakraborty, the GOWB distributed approximately USD 20,000 in culling compensation per rates established in a central government February 7, 2008 directive. This circular established the following prices: USD 1 for an egg-laying chicken, USD 0.80 for a broiler, USD 1.5 for a duck and USD 0.4 for a chick. Compensation costs are split 50/50 between the center and the state. Individual states may top-up this compensation program through their own state budgets. Assam (see Reftel) doubled the amount paid for a broiler to better approximate prevailing market prices. GOWB officials did not see a need to enhance their compensation program which admittedly is about half of the prevailing market prices.

No Confirmed Cases of Human Infection

14. (U) Both Assam and West Bengal have no confirmed cases of human infection. The Malda district's chief medical officer confirmed that four culling personnel had exhibited flu-like symptoms; however, one has since recovered, two were asthma patients and one is under continued observation.

#### GOWB's Weak AI Information Campaign

15. (SBU) Chakraborty briefs the press daily on the state's efforts to manage the AI outbreak. However, unlike during the previous outbreak this year, the department has not updated the state's website which has contributed to a lack of official news about the AI. He expressed his displeasure at what he termed "sensationalist" and "irresponsible" journalism that he claims has focused on isolated instances of culling non-compliance or minor logistical differences in implementation. While he did not have a figure for the overall effect on the state's poultry industry, he noted that the immediate effect of the announcement of AI outbreak had contributed to a 25 percent decline in the market price of processed chicken in unaffected districts such as Kolkata. He also told Poloff about the state government's plans to have an AI testing laboratory facility operational by the end of January 2009. The facility will be responsible for Eastern India and is the only one of its kind outside of Bhopal. It should provide for expedited confirmation in the event of an outbreak.

16. (SBU) Despite the GOWB's claim that it had completed culling and mopping operations in the affected villages, one of post's media contacts in Malda cited seeing poultry in villages well within the epicenter of outbreak. He also reported villager dissatisfaction with the compensation amount and an initial unwillingness to participate in the culling program. The GOWB utilized the local imams to convince the inhabitants of the Muslim villages to participate in the culling program.

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17. (SBU) In a December 23 meeting Chakraborty privately suggested a correlation between the Islamic religious festivals such as Eid-ul-Azha and Muharram and the AI outbreaks in West Bengal. During these festivals animals are often exchanged or given for sacrifice and there is a significant amount of cross-border trade with Bangladesh. The GOI prohibits the export of beef (a central competency) and only the governments of West Bengal and Kerala permit its slaughter (a state competency). Cattle producers from throughout India therefore export live cattle to Bangladesh for slaughter. Traders return with skins and hides for West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh tanneries and with live poultry from Bangladesh. He personally advocated the legal export of beef to limit the cross border trade in livestock and poultry and as an additional source of government revenue. While acknowledging the political sensitivities of a possible AI/Islamic festival correlation, he said he would not be surprised if AI reappears during the January 2009 observance of Shiite holiday Muharram.

#### No New Reports in Northeast India

18. (U) There are no new confirmed reports of the H5N1 virus in the state of Assam. Meghalaya has finished culling, mopping and sanitization in the affected border region with Assam (one of Assam's epicenter's three kilometer radius extends into Meghalaya). There are no reports of unusual bird mortality in the neighboring state of Nagaland.

#### Comment

19. (SBU) The current AI outbreak is much smaller than the outbreak that occurred previously this year and, as a result, has not tested the GOWB's claimed ability to better contain an AI outbreak. The suggestion of a correlation between AI outbreaks and Islamic festivals is worth examining, but in a tactful manner given the political sensitivities.

PAYNE